

Tales from Old Harbin

These stories were told to me by my brother Faivel (Paul) and my sister Leah, as well as my parents. They depict events that occurred in the early 1930s when Faivel was between 9 and 12 years old and Leah was between 5 and 8. I was born much later in Australia.

At that time, Harbin was occupied by Japan. Jews were essentially left alone. The Japanese atrocities were perpetrated mainly on the local Chinese population. However, the Russian inhabitants were deeply antisemitic. Leah tells of a time when she was 5 years old and she was sitting on a bench outside her home. It was Easter. A Russian man came up to her and greeted her in the customary fashion for Easter, "Christ is risen". Leah, young as she was, answered in the customary way, "Indeed he has risen". The man continued to talk to her, and Leah was terrified that her mother would come out and speak to her in Yiddish. Fortunately, this did not happen.

Betar protected the Jewish population from Russian thugs who would come and taunt and fight Jewish people. Faivel was a member of Betar and frequently fought Russian kids who taunted him and his friends with antisemitic jibes.

Manchuria was a bread basket and food was plentiful. Winters were bitterly cold, reaching temperatures of below -20°C. So, during summer, vegetables were pickled in brine and stored in large barrels. There was always sauerkraut, pickled cucumbers etc available.

Ice skating was a favourite pastime on the frozen Sungari (Songhua) river in winter.

There was a Russian stove in the kitchen. This was a large structure that was wood fired and it kept the house warm in winter. People would sleep on the stove to keep warm.

The family had a Japanese servant who was always good to them. He looked after the house and cooked meals, so my mother had time to herself and frequently played Mah Jongg with her friends. She had quite a shock when she arrived in Australia. No servants. She had to do everything herself. It is a great credit to her that she took that in her stride.

Pride of place in the home was the samovar. This was a hot water urn with a distinctive shape and heated with charcoal (these days they have an electric heating element in them). A teapot with tea in it was placed on the top of it to keep it hot. Typically, some tea would be poured from the teapot and the cup filled with water from the samovar. Russians like their tea hot, weak and sweet with a slice of lemon added to the cup, as do I. My mother would suck a sugar cube and sip unsweetened tea through the cube, or alternatively drink tea together with jam.

My mother made kvass. This was an alcoholic drink made from bread and raisins which was stored in large jars which were cork-sealed and allowed to ferment.* One day, the corks must not have been sealed properly, because the pressure in the jars caused them to pop out, spilling kvass all over the floor. The house cat licked up the spillage and became drunk. It was a sight to see it running crookedly all over the house, jumping on tables and knocking things over and bumping into things.

Faivel was a scallywag. He was always thinking up ways to play tricks on people. For example, he would place an empty purse on the ground in the street. To this purse a very thin long string or

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cotton was attached. Faivel would be hiding somewhere holding the other end of the string. Someone might come along, see the purse and bend to pick it up, whereupon Faivel would pull the string, moving the purse and seeing the reaction of the luckless person.**

Faivel would often get his little sister, Leah, to do the dirty work, while he hid. There was an apple tree in a neighbouring yard full with apples hanging over the fence. Faivel would get Leah to climb the fence and steal some apples. She got caught once and told off. Faivel was nowhere to be seen.

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